

How GMO and hybrid seeds impact farmers'

mental and physical health



Photo: Ayşe Gürsöz, Thousand Currents' Photographer in Residence

Susan Owiti

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Kenyan farmers won a significant legal battle on 7 March 2025 when they secured a conservatory order from the Court of Appeal in their case against the government's decision to lift the ban on Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs). The court ruled that the Kenyan government cannot begin to import GMOs as planned while the appeal is ongoing.

In this interview, peasant feminist activist Susan Owiti from the Kenyan Peasants League (KPL), one of the organisations that filed the court case, talks about the dangers that GMO and hybrid seeds pose to the mental and physical health of farmers – and particularly women farmers. Loans taken out to buy patented seeds lead to cycles of debt, depression, physical violence and even suicide. The antidotes: organising peasants through the practices of agroecology, the nurturing of indigenous seed sovereignty, and denouncing GMO and hybrid seeds.

Why is the Kenyan Peasants League challenging the government on GMOs?

GMOs are false solutions. Multinational companies are telling farmers that GMOs will solve their problems by helping them adapt to climate change and by increasing their income. But this is a lie. When you plant GMOs, you must use chemical fertilisers, pesticides and herbicides. These products lead to losses in soil health and biodiversity. Fertilisers further [contribute to climate change](#) because of the fossil fuels used in their production.

European biotech companies such as Bayer AG have been selling pesticides to Kenya that are [banned in the EU](#) due to their risks to human health. So, GMO and hybrid seeds also threaten the physical health of farmers and farmworkers. In addition, they trap farmers in Kenya in cycles of debt. We already have seen the negative effects of hybrid seeds and do not wish the added challenge of GMOs.

When the Kenyan government lifted the ban on GMOs after the 2022 election, we immediately decided to challenge it in the courts together with the [Law Society of Kenya](#). As peasant farmers, we are first of all denouncing the fact that none of the affected groups were heard, even though public participation is required in the Kenyan Constitution. And second, we are denouncing GMOs, which will affect farmers' indigenous seeds. The March victory strengthens our commitment to fighting for food sovereignty, human and ecological health and the protection of smallholder farmers from corporate control.

The critique of GMO and hybrid seeds has many dimensions as you mention. But we hear less about the mental and physical health impacts on peasants in general, and on women peasants specifically. What have you observed in your work?

First of all, let me say that talking about the physical and mental health of rural women in Kenya is especially important today, as there is an epidemic of [gender-based violence](#) and [femicides](#) in the country.

Hybrid and GMO seeds have contributed a lot to women's mental health problems, especially for smallholder food producers. Multinational companies come with a lot of

high hopes, telling farmers that they will get more produce, but they are really tying the farmers up in debt. Farmers are faced with the question: will I spend money on food, or will I pay off my debt? These are often women who have a hard time finding any cash. How will they pay back these loans and feed their families?

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I especially want to bring in the perspective of women farmers because they are most often targeted by multinational seed companies. Development projects focused on women's empowerment are popular today, and the companies selling GMO and hybrid seeds and the matching chemical fertilisers are jumping on this trend. They often target women by giving them loans for seeds in the name of 'empowerment'. But women often end up signing documents they do not understand. Maybe they think that they will save their family from poverty, but this actually traps them in a cycle of debt and poverty. Sometimes they agree to give up their land, or their animals, or the crops they had saved, if they cannot pay the debt. When the women cannot repay on time it can lead to depression, stress or even suicide.

Can you explain why debt is often higher for farmers using GMO and hybrid seed than for those relying on indigenous seed?

They tell the farmers that indigenous seeds cannot produce enough. This is the way that the multinational companies take control over farmers' lives.

It is illegal to save hybrid and GMO seeds from season to season – because they are patented. That means every time farmers want to grow, they need money. And they might not even have repaid their debt from last season, which means they need a new loan to buy seeds. The companies tell the farmers that indigenous seeds cannot produce enough – yet we have seen our great grandparents producing food in bulk with indigenous seeds.

With indigenous seeds, you preserve your own seeds, from your own harvest. Like today, we harvested sweet potatoes at the farm and now we will use what we

harvested for re-planting. So, I don't spend any money buying seeds and I don't need to take out a loan. And that is why within KPL we are educating farmers to preserve their own seeds, and to multiply them.

We also know that debt and increased poverty worsens gender-based violence. Do you see similar links between gender-based violence and patented seeds in your work with women farmers in Kenya?

Gender-based violence often arises when women sign documents they do not understand, and maybe they do this without their husband knowing or consenting. When the partner learns about it, women may be beaten or chased out of the house with their children.

In Kenya, we have a culture that oppresses women. Over the past years, different classes of women have gotten organised – let me call it organised instead of empowered – but peasant women have been left behind. These are the women who ensure that the world has enough food, but when it comes to decision making and issues of access, they face a lot of violence and discrimination. A woman can work, and then when the harvest is ready, the husband will



come and sell everything and disappear with the money. And then, when the husband returns and the wife questions him, she risks being beaten. We had a case like this in Mariwa.

These are some of the many issues we are addressing within the Women's Articulation of the Kenyan Peasant's League. Recently, in 2022, we successfully crowdfunded to buy land for a rescue center for women facing gender-based violence and land grabbing. Women can come here to heal physically and mentally while they farm together and fight for justice in their respective cases. The KPL is also working with allied organisations to fight gender-based violence in the country, both at the community level and by demonstrating on the street.

Finally, can you tell us why an agroecological approach to food production is better for the physical and mental health of women farmers and their families?

Women who practice agroecology often have their own seed banks, and then they have control. Like me: I have my own seeds, so when I want to grow I can plant different varieties. I know each one, and I know how it grows and what it produces. Agroecology gives us the power of independence: we have our own seeds, we have our own knowledge, and so we cannot be deceived by the companies.

The victory on the 7th of March was a step towards safe, healthy and independent food production for Kenyans. Those of us in the agroecology movement are coming from different parts of the world, and we all have our indigenous seeds. Let us preserve them, let us multiply them, because that is the only way we can fight the multinational companies. Let us reject the multinational seeds and let us embrace our indigenous seeds! ■

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